

AT THE END OF THE ROAD¹

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From *The Forum*

THE latter part of the summer found me tramping through the heavy, grey dust of a road in southern Iowa, so tired that I scarcely felt the hunger that had bitten me in the morning. Now, at noon, the hot, August sun sent its untempered rays down upon me as though it, too, united with all the world in fiery hatred for the wanderer upon the open road. Once I had seen romance in the long trail that always beckoned alluringly from the thin, indefinite distance where it touched the horizon but, though I had pursued with high hopes, the horizon ever lay beyond and left its promise unfulfilled. Now its mystery, the mystery of the unattainable, mocked me as I sweltered in the suffocating heat of a burning earth. The dim, green fields I had dreamed of, where Freedom reigned, were still far away. I was sick of it all. Life could not be solved so simply.

This unhappy trend of my thoughts was broken when I rounded a curve in the road and saw to the northwest a small, woody town lying somnolent under the hot, noon sun of August. From a grove on the outskirts of the village came the unmistakable tunes of a merry-go-round. Ah, here was a chance to pick up a little money to tide me on my way!

I quickly reached the edge of the grove, and ducked under a single strand of wire that doubtless marked the sacred precincts of celebration. Now the rising and

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falling hum of a large concourse of people struck me pleasantly, for I liked the impersonal companionship of crowds.

As I made my way through the trees, I saw that it was the typical country town celebration which had become familiar to me in my wanderings. The daughters dressed too gaudily and the mothers too sombrely. The men stood about in groups, smoking and discussing their crops. Everywhere, alone or in groups, swaggered small boys, exhibiting large satisfaction in unreproved stickiness and in the wide choice of indigestibles. Nevertheless, it struck me now, as it always did, that there was an under-current of weariness running through the whole crowd. Released for a day from the midsummer drudgery of the farm, their senses were too dull to appreciate such a change.

Finally, I reached the row of stands where all kinds of foods and drinks were dispensed to the hungry and thirsty swarm of people. My request for a job was repeatedly refused after a single glance at my disreputable attire. At last I reached a hamburger stand at the end of the line. The two proprietors were plainly having a hard time in handling the crowd. Here I was quickly hired for the day.

I threw off my coat and donned a greasy apron. It was fine to get back on the old job again, I thought, as I slapped sizzling hamburgers between unbuttered buns. The noise of the crowd, insistently surging about us, seemed comforting.

The balloon ascension in the early afternoon gave me leisure to study my employers. The one who had given me the job was short and fat, with tight-fitting trousers of greenish hue showing beneath the apron he wore. Of Teutonic origin, surely. His face reflected his nationality, a red nose issuing bluntly from heavy cheeks and light blue eyes, crowned by a bald head that gleamed palely out of a fringe of sandy hair. Seeing me observing him, he came up and announced that he was Dutch Frank. Then

he turned to his partner, a tall, loose-limbed, grey-faced and grey-haired man who impressed me as prematurely old from dissipation. Out of the dark-rimmed hollows falling deeply from the high cheek-bones, his eyes, filled with a wide, hungry abstraction, stared out through the branches of the leaves about us.

"Let me," said Dutch Frank, expansively, "give you a knock-down to my revered partner in this noble enterprise. His name is Bill and he's got the tastes of a Kentucky colonel — he takes his whiskey raw."

"Howdy!" Bill's face remained expressionless as he extended a limp hand toward me. "Why don't y' ever forget that old spiel of yours, Frank?" he concluded in moody expostulation.

The conversation gradually dropped off. Bill again withdrew into himself and gazed with lack-lustre eyes into the air. Frank sat on a barrel of cider and smoked a pipe in stoical enjoyment.

The respite from labor soon ended and the hot, tired mob once more surrounded us. The air grew damp and fetid. Strong above the spiciness of hamburger came the sickening odor of peanuts in process of mastication. The noise of celebration rolled up and enveloped us. Next to our stand, a dark-skinned vendor of fruits and cold drinks bawled out incessantly to the restless throng and his words became wearily familiar to me through constant repetition. "Come on over, folks, come on over. We'll treat yuh right. Don't yuh ever git hongry? Don't yuh ever git tired?" The bellow ended in a note of ineffable sorrow. Then, chancing to spy some attractive face in the crowd, he cried out in an insinuating tone, "Oh, you Lizzie, there . . . you with the bright blue eyes. Won't y' come over and talk awhile? I'm the pride of the state o' Bingville, America's fav'rite son." The girl giggled and tried to assume a demure expression but her embarrassment caused her face to draw up into rather terrifying contortions. "Why, you poor little son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed her admirer in a voice

that mingled pity and contempt. "Say, ain't these corn-feds a nice bunch?" he grinned at me as I came up to borrow a box.

Time passed swiftly. Though we could not see the sun, we knew that it was declining, for the oppressive, stale heat of the day was swept from under the trees by the cool, wet breeze of evening, which held the peculiar smell of dew fallen on dust. From the neighboring meadow, to the north, came the pungent smell of wild hay. Then the sun fell to the level of the horizon, threw a dim red curtain over the west, and faded away. After the work and grime of the day, twilight came restfully.

I heard a movement at my side and, turning, saw Bill leaning on the counter, chin resting in his palm, his wide grey eyes filled with the dreamy, troubled stare I had noticed in the early afternoon.

"Well, Bill, what do you think of it?" He remained silent, looking sombrely into the distance. Finally he said, irrelevantly, "See that yellow strip out there in the west? It's so clear, almost wet—like whiskey." He moved a little closer. His voice, though low, quivered tensely, almost out of control. "Oh, I wish this burg was n't dry—I got t' have a drink!" I noticed that all the softness had fled from the eyes and a hard, desperate eagerness lay there instead. His hands grasped the edge of the counter so hard that the veins stood out blue and snakelike in the ghastly yellow skin. "I guess I'm all in, Bo," he concluded, and as I saw again the grey face I believed him.

Lights began to appear. The merry-go-round blazed with color and its unending discord seemed to beat uselessly against the faint line of darkness that hurled the jarring tunes back upon us derisively. In the narrow belt of light the crowd moved restlessly, after its short rest at meal time. The older men and women had gone home with the children and only the young people remained. As evening grew, they threw off all restraint. Groups of heavy-faced farmer boys swaggered past and

cried out familiarly to the young women they met. These answered back as roughly and usually occasioned a roar of laughter by their sharply personal replies. Then liquor began to flow from some unseen source. The crowd divided into groups, all anxious for a fight. Several times we narrowly avoided trouble by Frank's seasoned diplomacy. Suddenly I noticed that Bill had disappeared.

After an hour the work became pressing. On all sides, the mob clamored. The cool night air became warm and stifling. The mixture of odors struck like a blow. Above the general smell of hamburger and fruit, rose the heavy fumes of whiskey and cheap perfume.

In a lull, when the capricious throng had ebbed away, I rested against the counter and looked up through the leaves into the night sky. How strange it seemed suddenly to feel the peaceful beauty of the night, with the twinkling stars shining so silently in their ebony setting, so indifferent and untouched by the brutishness raging about us. As the wind stirred the leaves, it brought the cool touch of fog, gathered, I fancied, from some grassy hollow where fireflies burned their tiny lanterns of green and yellow.

Immersed in pleasant reverie, I did not at once notice Bill come in until he coughed. He leaned upon the counter beside me and looked into the darkness. His eyes shone with a warm light and a faint color touched his cheeks.

"Resting, are you?" he asked sociably, turning toward me.

His breath came to me heavy with the fumes of whiskey. We stood there for a long time. I was too tired to talk. Bill seemed to indulge in pleasant retrospection.

"Well, Bill," I spoke lazily, "how do you like this kind of a life?"

His expression changed swiftly. "Rotten!" he exclaimed, so vehemently that I was startled.

"How did you get into such work, then?"

He settled himself more firmly against an empty barrel. "I started when I was a kid," he began, in his low monotone. "My folks did n't want me around so I got t' work. Found a job with a guy that sold hot dogs on circuit fairs. Afterwards, I knocked about, but I liked the crowds so I went into cahoots with Dutch Frank. We tried skin games for awhile, but the law got pretty tight so we started a hamburger outfit." He stopped. We were silent once more. The crowd had slowly deserted us until only a few stragglers walked uneasily. The night had crept in closer and now, as its silence came to us, the yellow tawdriness of the lights seemed incongruous beside the softer darkness of nature. I looked at my watch. Eleven o'clock. An hour more before the lights went out.

"Tell you what." Bill had evidently been thinking back into his life. "I'm going to cut out all this pretty soon." He came closer and spoke confidentially. "I got a girl up to Peoria, Illinois. When she was just a little runt, I found her on the streets, about half froze. Took her to where I stayed and fed her good. Then, when me 'n Frank went out on the circuits, she stayed with an old woman who took care of her. Gee, she got to be the purtiest little kid you ever seen. The boys laughed at me and says I was an old fool but I tell you they was pretty nice to her when she happened around."

He fell into a fit of retrospection.

"What then?"

"When she was eighteen, she run away." He commenced abruptly. "It just about busted me up, I guess. I started boozing pretty strong then and one night I got the D. T.'s bad. Then she come back. She felt so mean about it that I did n't say anything. I could n't anyway — I was too glad. After that, she was as straight as a string. Went to church too. She always wanted me to quit work and let her take care o' me but I would n't do it. And then, I was tryin' to cut the booze first. So I went ahead with Frank — but I guess I 'll go on the

water-wagon soon. "Say," he lowered his voice slightly, "I got a letter from her a couple o' days ago. She wrote that she was goin' t' be married to a fine young fellow and that they was goin' t' run a little truck farm just outside of Peoria. And she says, 'Dad, we got it all fixed up. You got t' throw up your work and come and live with us. You're goin' t' get the warmest room in the house — on the south side. Besides, we need you to take care of the chickens.' What do you know about that!" He laughed deep in his throat. "An old cuss like me feeding chickens. But see me beat it to that little farm as soon as the season's over. Can't jump my contract with my partner, y' know."

I was filled with a peculiar pity for the old man, a pity mixed with pleasure in his good-fortune. Surely, he needed the care of a kind daughter. Out there on the farm, wearing faded blue overalls, surrounded by grunting swine and bawling calves — I smiled — Bill would certainly look out of place there.

Slowly, as the place became deserted, the lights winked out, one by one, until our stand alone stood out in the gloom. Everything seemed asleep. I walked over to where Frank lay dozing in the grass. Happening to glance behind me, I caught Bill hastily removing a bottle from his lips. So he was drinking again! Oh, well, let him go to the devil in his own way.

I went to Frank and asked if I might retire for the night.

"Sure," he grunted sleepily. "You'll find a couple of blankets in that box yonder. You can lay right here if you ain't afraid of sleepin' on the ground."

I unfolded the blankets and had hardly touched them before oblivion seized my senses. From this sleep I was wakened by a kick in the ribs. "Get up!" Frank was yelling at me, "and beat it to a doctor."

"What's the matter?" I asked, drowsily.

"Bill's run wild — half crazy with booze."

Grabbing my coat, which I had been using as a pillow,

I stumbled out into the darkness, but hesitated as an awful cry came from behind me. In it sounded such unutterable fear that I stopped, shivering.

"Float along!" Frank's voice had a desperate note in it. "He's workin' into a fit again."

It seemed a long way to the town and my shoes were soon soaked with dew which afterwards caked into mud as I struck the grey, dusty wraith of road. Even then, I felt the comfortable security of a dry road in the cold, wet darkness and appalling silence of late night. By rare luck, I met a belated traveller who directed me to the doctor's residence.

After I had pounded on the door until my knuckles were raw, the doctor finally appeared. When I stated my case, he seemed pleased in a leisurely way, at the strangeness of it all.

"Hurry, please!" I urged, growing angry. He seized his case and I could hear the muffled thudding of his feet behind me in the dust of the road.

When we arrived at the stand, Frank came from behind a tree. He was mopping his face vigorously.

"The old cuss's crazy!" he groaned. "Go in there once and see."

Inside of the stand, Bill lay on the blanket that I had vacated. His eyes, red and blood-shot, glared wildly at us. Like a tired, beaten dog, he whined in his throat. Then he began to mumble in a rising voice until it came as a prolonged scream. "Look!" he cried, clutching at the darkness with his skinny talons. "See, it's tryin' to get me. You devil—!" He fought madly with some invisible horror. His face twisted into awful lines. Perspiration glistened on his forehead, but his face was ashen pale. He lay silent for a moment, sobbing. Then, without warning, his voice rose into a wild scream so full of unfathomed terror that the doctor looked fearfully about him into the darkness. I felt my finger nails cutting into my palms. But Bill was subsiding and, at last, lay

in a stupor. The doctor bent over him for a few moments and then arose. "Delirium Tremens," he announced, with a gesture of helplessness. Then he added, "A fool — such a fool." Encouraged by seeing that we were listening respectfully to him, he swore with the careful pride of a man who knows how to swear virtuously.

"Pretty bad, Doc?" Frank asked mildly.

"He's got a weak heart," answered the doctor shortly, "probably he won't recover from this."

I suddenly thought of the pretty girl in Peoria who was going to repay Bill's kindness at last — but too late. For her, too, life would resolve itself into darkness.

"Poor little kid," I murmured, "— and poor old Bill."

They looked at me questioningly, so I told them about the letter Bill had received from his adopted daughter. The doctor stalked about in great sympathy. Frank seemed unmoved. I felt a hot anger against him. He noted this and grinned.

"So he told you that story too, did he?" Frank spoke in a curious tone. "He always does that when he's soused."

"It was n't true?" I exclaimed.

"Oh, he picked up a fool kid from the streets once but she ran away with a travelling man. When Bill is tight with booze, he's got it all fixed up. Poor old devil — she never come back."

We were silent after that. The far, crystal-clear notes of the whip-poor-will came to us faintly like the impersonal, haunting presence of the night, which seemed passively to behold the tragedy of life, sorrowing at it, but unable to help. The gloom deepened about us and slowly the lifeless chill of grey dawn wound its tenuous fingers about us as we sat in the yellow flare of light, stupidly considering the futile struggles of the broken man lying in our midst.

I was sick with the heaviness of my senses. I remem-

bered the Open Road; its promise of freedom had led to this — the painted lure of life and youth was but the mask of wanton death.

And in the east, dawn gathered in a cloudless sky that promised another hot day.